

HISTORIC AMERICAN BUILDINGS SURVEY

JOHN COLTRANE HOUSE

HABS No. PA-6670

Location: 1511 N. Thirty-third St., east side between Jefferson and Oxford streets, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania

**Present Owner/
Occupant:** Mary Alexander

Present Use: Residence

Significance: The John Coltrane House has cultural significance as the long-time residence of John W. Coltrane, the groundbreaking and innovative African-American jazz musician (1926–1967). Additionally, the building is a superlative extant example of a North Philadelphia row house constructed for Philadelphia's middle class at the turn-of-the-twentieth century.

Historian: Donna J. Rilling, Summer 2000.

PART I: HISTORICAL INFORMATION

A. Physical History:

1. Date of erection: ca. 1903. A November 1902 land transaction first references the lots by street number as the final subdivision of the property was completed. By August 1905, No. 1511 was sold for use as a residence.¹
2. Architect: Unknown. Landowner Clifford Pemberton used architect E. Allen Wilson for a later development, but no known source ties Wilson to the design of the row which includes the Coltrane House.
3. Original and subsequent owners: Reference is to the Deed Books and Real Estate Transfer File 12 N 16: 20, 32, 73, and 75, Philadelphia County, Pennsylvania.

1904	November 15, 1904 Clifford Pemberton, Jr. To The Land Security Company of Philadelphia
1905	August 9, 1905 The Land Security Company of Philadelphia To Nora Blanche de Lery, wife of Joseph B. de Lery

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1906	August 24, 1906 Joseph B. de Lery and Nora Blanche his wife To The Land Security Company of Philadelphia
1914	May 11, 1914 Clifford Pemberton, Jr. and Anita Le Roy his wife To Frederick M. Negley
1914	May 11, 1914 Frederick M. Negley To Clifford Pemberton, Jr.
1919	December 8, 1919 Clifford Pemberton, Jr. and Anita Le Roy his wife To Karl W. Konrad
1921	June 30, 1921 Karl W. Konrad and Caroline his wife To Albert Keinath
1922	June 30, 1922 Albert Keinath To Caroline W. Konrad, wife of Karl W.
1927	January 25, 1927 Karl W. Konrad and Caroline W. his wife To Matilda Konrad and Lena Konrad
1952	July 21, 1952 Matilda Konrad To John William Coltrane

4. Original and subsequent occupants:

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The original occupants were probably Nora Blanche de Lery and her family. Between 1906 and 1919, the house was owned by Clifford Pemberton and let as a rental property. Karl W. Konrad purchased the property in 1919 and the house remained a Konrad family residence until 1952, when it was bought by John W. Coltrane. During the Coltrane tenure, various family members shared the residence. Upon Coltrane's death, the house passed to his cousin Mary Alexander.²

5. Original plans and construction: The house is a full three stories with rear ell and basement. Principal access is from the west end. The building footprint reveals a deep and narrow plan typical of attached houses constructed on tight urban lots.
6. Alterations and additions: Except for a few modest alterations, the building's plan, form, and detailing remain largely undisturbed. Within a couple of decades, the front porch was fully enclosed with walls composed of a paneled base topped by large windows. Portions of the oak living room floor have been replaced as evidenced by new planking and the absence of a fireplace hearth. The ceilings have been dropped throughout much of the house, and in some cases metal grids and synthetic panels have been installed as visible in the dining room. Hinged doors between the living and dining rooms have disappeared. The stairway up to the third floor has been cased and a kitchen added to create a separate apartment on the top floor. The first-floor kitchen has been the target of numerous changes and updates over the last century. The rear enclosed porch has been updated to support modern service activities.

B. Historical Context

At the turn of the twentieth century, the block of N. Thirty-third Street between Oxford and Jefferson Streets did not auger well for residential development. The area was on the fringe of Brewerytown, a neighborhood of industrial operations and noxious smells and processes connected to the beer-making business. Brewerytown stretched from Thirtieth to Thirty-second Streets between Girard and Glenwood Avenues; factory owners wedged housing in the small streets between the main thoroughfares dedicated to manufacturing and service buildings. The 1500 block of Thirty-third Street was severed from Brewerytown by a strip of rail lines; the eastern extent of these parcels came to an abrupt halt at the intimidating mass of Pennsylvania Railroad tracks. Any houses, then, constructed on the east side of the 1500 block would be at the mercy of the busy rail traffic servicing the brewery industry and other city businesses. An array of freight, lumber and coal yards, and telegraph wires stretched across the rear of the house lots. The uneven terrain that required spanning the railroad with a masonry bridge created additional physical and psychological barriers.³

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There were amenities, however; Fairmount Park beckoned Philadelphians—any houses on Thirty-third Street facing west would have the advantage of scenic park views and refreshing breezes. Affluent residents paid premium prices for park-side houses elsewhere along the edge, though none sat as close to the railroad tracks as would those between Oxford and Jefferson Streets. Solidly blue-collar and small proprietor families headed by firemen, coopers, bartenders, butchers, grocers, and boardinghouse keepers had wended their way as far as Thirty-second and Thompson Streets by 1900. Streetcar lines provided the means for downtown pleasure seekers to reach the park, and for residents in areas bordering the park to commute to center city. Connecting lines made major sections of North Philadelphia and Northeast Philadelphia accessible as well.⁴

After owning the land on Thirty-third Street for more than a decade, and developing other rows, Clifford Pemberton turned to his problematic lots. He adopted a strategy for development sometime early in the twentieth century. After a new park entrance was established on Thirty-third Street across from Oxford in 1894, residential and ecclesiastical construction rapidly followed in the block north of the 1500.⁵ Certainly this development factored into Pemberton's rumination about the advantages and disadvantages of the location; he ultimately decided to target solidly middle class buyers.⁶ White-collar employees of the nearby brewery businesses or other supporting industries, promised potential purchasers or, failing that, tenants. Ornamentation—including leaded- and stained glass, mosaic tile, and classical detailing—amenities, and room sizes and arrangements all factored into the construction costs as well as the values Pemberton's finished houses could command. Subject to an abundance of uncertainties, then, the six attached dwellings that Pemberton built, Nos. 1509 through 1519, were speculative in the truest sense of the word.⁷

Pemberton's venture to build fashionable, yet modestly sized and priced houses yielded mixed success. A sale in August 1905 of No. 1511 failed, and the house reverted to Pemberton's development company the following August. Pemberton retained the property and derived rental income for more than a dozen years. In 1919, the dwelling's sale to Karl W. Konrad—who as a caterer and petty proprietor fit Pemberton's initial target group—was successfully contracted. The Konrad family owned No. 1511 for more than three decades.⁸

By the 1950s, N. Thirty-third Street and surrounding blocks varied considerably from Pemberton's day. Some features—the railroad tracks and industrial brewery buildings—remained constant; however, the dirty and noisy vitality that they had brought to the neighborhood was waning. Prohibition and the Great Depression devastated the Brewerytown economy in the 1920s and 1930s and the de-industrialization of Philadelphia in the 1940s and 1950s further constricted the local employment base. The neighborhood in the vicinity of No. 1511 N. Thirty-third Street, historically teetering between industrial and residential uses, became fully undesirable to white middle-class residents, who moved to other areas of the city or

the expanding suburbs; white blue-collar families left as well. In their place, African Americans, in search of employment and drawn to the urban north from the rural south in the wake of agricultural depression, migrated to Philadelphia beginning in the mid-1920s.

Although Coltrane moved to Philadelphia from his native North Carolina to further his musical training, he was part of this larger demographic trend. Following a stint in the U.S. Navy band during World War II, he returned to Philadelphia. On July 21, 1952, he purchased the house and lot at 1511 N. Thirty-third Street. He was joined in residence by his mother, cousin Mary Alexander, and a family friend; after their October 3, 1955 marriage, his wife Juanita Austin ("Naima") Coltrane also lived in the house.

In the 1950s while in residence at No. 1511, John Coltrane's musical reputation began to soar. After playing in a variety of bands and venues in and out of Philadelphia, Coltrane recorded his first solo album in 1957, *Coltrane*, with which "his mature style first became apparent."⁹ Late in the 1950s, he worked with the Thelonious Monk quartet and then reaffiliated himself with the Miles Davis band. This association with Davis led the duo to developing "a free jazz which was based not on conventional chord progressions but rather on a modal accompaniment ...[this] permitted harmonic relationships of much greater scope than in Bebop...[which was] based harmonically on traditional Western music scales."¹⁰ This singular—though not universally acclaimed—style highlighted Coltrane as an innovative tenor saxophonist, and heralded the decline of Bebop-era jazz.¹¹ His trademark sheets of sound and free jazz form reached maturity in the 1960s and these contributions were recognized and honored with his designation as *Down Beat's* "Jazzman of the Year" in 1965.¹² Coltrane's professional success was preempted by personal strife and, ultimately, tragedy; after his 1966 divorce, John Coltrane died prematurely from liver cancer on July 16, 1967.¹³

Throughout Coltrane's career, he used No. 1511, N. Thirty-third Street, Philadelphia— particularly the private third-floor apartment—between tours and as a periodic residence alternating with a place in New York. In the spring of 1957, the second-floor rear bedroom provided refuge during Coltrane's struggle to overcome his heroin addiction.¹⁴ Since his death in 1967, Mary Alexander has preserved the house in much the same state as it existed during Coltrane's ownership.¹⁵

PART II: ARCHITECTURAL INFORMATION¹⁶

A. General Statement

1. Architectural character: The John Coltrane House is representative of a nicely detailed middle-class row house in early-twentieth century North Philadelphia. The attached house was constructed as part of a larger row of six attached dwellings with two alternating facade variations. Both the main

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portion and the rear ell contain three full stories covered by a flat roof. On the facade, a parapet wall featuring a curvilinear gable and tiling drawn from Spanish Baroque sources conceals the roof. However, the bulk of the house's detailing, both exterior and interior, shows the influence of the then popular Colonial Revival.

2. Condition of fabric: Very good.

B. Description of Exterior:

1. Overall dimensions: The house measures approximately 16'-6" wide and 77'-4" deep.
2. Foundations: The foundations are of rubble stone and with brick above.
3. Walls:

West Elevation: The brick has been painted-over; the neighboring houses have walls laid-up in American bond. A now closed-up basement window topped by a segmental arch faces onto the sidewalk. The first-story is dominated by an enclosed porch that in structure and form reads as one unit with the house to the south. At the second story, a large three-sided wood bay is sheathed in pressed metal. The three double-hung windows are separated by pilaster strips with recessed panels; classically-inspired swags extend across the top of the bay. At the third floor, a Palladian window at center dominates with the decorative parapet gable above. The curvilinear parapet gable and tiled roof is framed by brick corbeling topped by pressed metal consoles detailed with acanthus leaves.

East (and South) Elevation(s): Behind the front room of the house, the width of the house reduces from 17'-3" to 13'-2" resulting in a rear ell that along with its mirror-image twin to the south provides a light and air well for the interior rooms. These walls are brick laid-up in American bond and topped by a simple metal cornice. At the rear of the first floor is an enclosed frame porch covered in asphalt shingles and separated from a similar construct on the house to the north by a brick wall. A door and window face out into the garden on the east side; there is another window in the porch's south wall. Within the light well on the first floor, a three-sided bay extends from the wall; additional windows light the living room, back stairs, and the kitchen. Above the porch, the second story features a rectangular asphalt-shingled bay with two sash windows. The third story contains a single sash window. The second and third floor walls in the ell are pierced by ten double-hung windows of varying sizes.

4. Structural system: Load-bearing brick walls.

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5. Porches, stoops: The first-story of the main (west) facade is dominated by an enclosed porch that in structure and form reads as one unit with the house to the south. A single pediment contains the entrances to both residences (reached by a common set of five concrete stairs) and displays, at center in relief, a ribboned laurel wreath. Thin Doric columns provide support for the roof. The porch enclosure extends behind a brick and stone wall-balustrade. This enclosure contains fixed glass panels and later jalousie windows; a more recent door with a fixed diamond window is set-off by sidelights. On the east wall at the rear of the ell is an enclosed rear porch.
6. Chimneys: There are two chimneys. The chimney servicing the living room fireplace is not visible from the street. A second flue, contained within a stack shared with the house to the north, rises along the east exterior wall and connects with the heating equipment in the basement and (originally) the kitchen.
7. Openings:
 - a. Doorways and doors: The house has two points of access—one in the east wall and one on the west. A relatively recent exterior door with a single fixed diamond pane opens onto the enclosed front porch. Double doors with fixed rectangular sash containing transparent glass backed by wire security grates open from the porch onto a vestibule. A second set of similarly detailed double doors open onto the living room, however the fixed rectangular lights in these are filled with stained and leaded glass articulated in a rather bold design. Both sets of doors are topped by transoms. The rear exterior door, possibly original to the house, contains a single four-light fixed window with paneled sections below; a modern storm/screen door fronts this opening.
 - b. Windows: Most of original sash has been replaced with aluminum one-over-one double hung windows. The west window of the living room contains a fixed panel with an arched, leaded transom above. The east living room window, opening onto the light well, is double hung with leaded panels in both the upper and lower sash. A small fixed leaded glass panel in the center of the dining room bay is flanked by two full-sized one-over-one windows. A small skylight, possibly original to the house, is located directly above this leaded panel.
8. Roof: Flat roof of unknown material, however it is most likely covered with a combination of gravel, asphalt sheeting, and tar.

C. Description of the Interior

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1. Floor plans:
 - a. Basement: A basement extends under the full depth of the house.
 - b. First floor: This floor shows a movement towards a more open plan relative to the compartmentalized Victorian row house interiors common in the previous generation. The vestibule communicates directly with the living room, which also contains the main staircase in one contiguous space. This opening up of private space to the direct gaze of visitors as well as the combination of formerly discrete living and circulation spaces suggests both a breakdown of the rigid Victorian social structure as well as a more homogenous neighborhood landscape that facilitated removal of buffers between family and strangers. While the principal family living-public entertainment room reflects a movement towards a more informal lifestyle, the compartmentalization of the dining room and the work areas—pantry, kitchen, and service porch—behind (including the back stair accessing the basement and upper floors) indicate the continued hierarchical relationship between the “service” and the “served.”
 - c. Second floor: The main staircase rises along the north wall to the second floor which is arranged around a conventional side passage. There are two large and one small bedrooms, and one bathroom. The primary bedroom at the front (west) enjoys the three-sided bay and a built-in wardrobe.
 - d. Third floor: The plan mimics that of the second floor. The front bedroom also contains a wood wardrobe which is less elaborate than that in the second floor. A kitchen has been installed on this story, making possible its use as a private apartment.
2. Stairways: There are two stairways. The principal stairs are open to the living room and turn ninety degrees to the right from a landing. The bannisters contain turned balusters and the portion of the stair below the landing curves outward to large paneled newel posts. A smaller secondary flight leads up from the kitchen and down from the pantry.
3. Flooring: There is oak planking throughout the first and second floors, with pine used on the third floor. The vestibule floor is mosaic made up of irregular rose and white colored tesserae.
4. Wall and ceiling finish:

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The walls are lathed and plastered. The vestibule walls are half-covered in ceramic tile. The kitchen and bathroom walls are tiled and plastered. The baseboard moldings are of painted wood approximately 10" wide.

5. Openings

- a. Doorways and doors: The interior doors are typically solid, five-paneled wood painted white. The second-story rear bedroom contains a roundheaded door with a fixed leaded-glass panel, possibly indicating its original use as a semi-private sitting room.
- b. Windows: (See exterior description)

6. Architectural furniture: The house contains many pieces of built-in furniture, a number of which reflect Colonial Revival influences. The dining room contains a corner china cabinet in the northwest corner detailed with fluted pilaster strips, a denticulated cornice, and ribboned swag in relief. The wooden fireplace mantel in the living room is similarly articulated with a line of dentils below the top surface, and a ribboned swag extending between two small urns, all carved in relief. The wardrobes in the second and third-story front bedrooms display similar, though somewhat pared-down, embellishment, as do the medicine cabinets in the bathrooms on both floors. The second-story bathroom still contains the original marble-top sink, now encased with a modern vanity. In the pantry, there are simply detailed floor-to-ceiling cabinets with glazed upper doors.

8. Hardware: Glass door knobs remain throughout much of the house; the pantry pulls and latches remain unchanged.

9. Mechanical systems: The house was originally fitted for gas.

D. Site

No. 1511 is situated within a row of six attached urban dwellings, which face Fairmount Park across N. Thirty-third Street.

PART III: SOURCES OF INFORMATION

A. Early views:

* Photographs of surrounding area, particularly railroad facilities. Folder No. 1970, Photograph Collection, Philadelphia City Archives and Records.

B. Bibliography

1. Primary and unpublished sources:

Baron, Randall. "John William Coltrane House." 23 Sep. 1985. Philadelphia Historical Commission, Register of Historic Places.

Deeds and Transfer Files. Philadelphia County, Pennsylvania.
Philadelphia City Archives and Records.

Philadelphia County Records.

Thomas, George E. "National Register of Historic Places Nomination, Brewerytown Historic District." 17 May 1990, revised 4 Sep. 1990. Philadelphia, Pennsylvania.

U.S. Census of Population, 1900. National Archives and Records Administration, Mid-Atlantic Branch. Philadelphia, Pennsylvania.

2. Secondary and published sources:

Baist, George W. Baist's Property Atlas of the City of Philadelphia. Philadelphia, 1895.

Smith, Elvino. Atlas of the 20th and 29th Wards of the City of Philadelphia. Philadelphia, 1907.

Weigley, Russell F., ed. Philadelphia: A 300-Year History. New York, 1982.

3. Likely sources not yet investigated:

Applications for Permits for Building, Philadelphia County (unindexed before 1906).

PART IV: PROJECT INFORMATION

The documentation of the John Coltrane House was undertaken during the summer of 2000 as part of a larger program to record historic landmarks and historically significant structures in North Philadelphia. The project was undertaken by the Historic American Buildings Survey/Historic American Engineering Record (HABS/HAER), E. Blaine Cliver, Chief of HABS/HAER, and Paul D. Dolinsky, Chief of HABS; funding was made possible through a congressional appropriation for documentation in Southeastern Pennsylvania and supplemented by a William Penn Foundation grant to the Foundation for Architecture for educational purposes. The project was planned and administered by HABS historian Catherine C. Lavoie and HABS architect Robert R. Arzola. The project historian was Donna J. Rilling (Professor, State University of New York at Stony Brook). Large format photography was undertaken by Joseph Elliott. The measured drawings were completed by a team of architects: Project Supervisor Matthew Crawford (The School of the Art

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Institute of Chicago), and architectural technicians Kwesi Daniels (Tuskegee University), Caroline LaVerne Wright (Tulane University), and Kenneth William Horrigan (ICOMOS-Sydney, Australia).

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1. Deed Books and Real Estate Transfer File 12 N 16: 73, 74, 75, 76; a 1901 Bromley city atlas depicts the footprints of nos. 1509–1519 N. 33rd Street, however as the map is not insurance related (necessitating correct information for business purposes) it is uncertain whether the footprints indicate houses that were planned, in progress, or completed. Regardless, the houses date from the first five years of the twentieth century.
2. Deed Books and Real Estate Transfer File 12 N 16: 75; Michael Lewis, "John Coltrane House National Historic Landmark Nomination," Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, July 5, 1998.
3. George W. Baist, *Baist's Property Atlas of the City of Philadelphia* (Philadelphia, 1895); George E. Thomas, "Brewerytown Historic District National Register of Historic Places Nomination," Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, May 17, 1990, revised September 4, 1990. See also Folder No. 1970, Photograph Collection, Philadelphia City Archives and Records, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania.
4. U.S. Census of Population, 1900, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, Enumeration District 738; Nathaniel Burt and Wallace E. Davies, "The Iron Age. 1876–1905," in *Philadelphia: A 300-Year History*, ed. Russell F. Weigley (New York, 1982) 483–485.
5. Lewis, sect. 8.
6. Deed Books and Real Estate Transfer File 12 N 16: 20, 32, 73, 74, 75, 76; Lewis, sect. 8.
7. Elvino Smith, *Atlas of the 20th and 29th Wards of the City of Philadelphia* (Philadelphia, 1907), shows seven row houses, although Lewis's nomination suggests that the Coltrane House was one of six rows.
8. Deed Books and Real Estate Transfer File 12 N 16: 75; Lewis, sect. 8.
9. Lewis, sect. 8.
10. Ibid.
11. Ibid.
12. Ibid.
13. Ibid.
14. Ibid.
15. Randall Baron, "John William Coltrane House," Philadelphia Register of Historic Places, Sept. 23, 1985; Lewis, sect. 8.
16. Additional summer 2000 photographs are located in the field notes file.